Supporting Transgender Students in SD#79: Finding Belonging in a School Community

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Abstract

Youth that identify as transgender or gender variant are reported to have a harder time finding belonging in a school community. This study explored the experiences of these youth in several schools on Vancouver Island. Qualitative data collection was done through anonymous surveys, one-on-one interviews with youth, as well as through the collection of student-created art. Data analysis revealed four main areas where schools and school districts could further support transgender and gender variant youth: the creating of gender-neutral change rooms/locker rooms, gender-neutral washrooms, teachers using the students chosen pronoun and chosen name, creating an ideal gender-neutral place as a place for transgender and gender variant youth to have a safe space to simply “be”. This study suggests that creating a sense of belonging where transgender and gender variant youth can feel accepted and welcomed is an important factor in these students staying in school, as well as creating and maintaining student wellbeing.
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Chapter 1: Problem to be investigated

Purpose of the Study

The problem investigated by the author is that transgender youth in rural public schools are an under-supported and vulnerable population who are not adequately advocated for by the teachers in their school community. The purpose of this study was to give voice to the experiences of transgender and gender variant youth and to educate the teachers of SD #79 in an effort to shift the school culture and to increase support for transgender youth in a rural community. It continues to be important for all staff and administrators to be made aware of issues that affect youth that identify as transgender. The author believes that supporting some of the most vulnerable youth at the school not only supports transgender and gender-variant youth, but also encourages the school staff to shift and challenge the existing attitudes and to improve the conditions for the entire student population. The author anticipated that with the implementation of the new curriculum, along with the new Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Policies, that staff will allow themselves to be open to change their fixed mindsets to support a vulnerable population in our schools.

Justification of the Study

The author has been working with, and teaching, youth at-risk for over a decade both within and outside of the public-school setting. It has been found by the author that the needs of transgender and gender variant youth that have not been served within SD#79 in the Cowichan Valley School District. There is a considerable difference between the needs of transgender youth being served in urban centers versus rural centers. For the purpose of this study, urban is exemplified by the city of Vancouver, due to it being the largest urban center in BC (600,000
people). It was also a place where the author lived and worked with transgender youth for a number of years. For the purpose of this study, rural is exemplified by the town of Duncan (5000 people), which is the largest town in school district #79. In Vancouver, it is commonplace to see gender-neutral bathrooms and change rooms in public pools and community centers. By creating gender-neutral spaces, Vancouver has made the needs and services for transgender people more visible. However, the high cost of living in Vancouver, combined with the financial cost of gender reassignment hormones and/or surgery as well as the required counselling, is extremely prohibitive to transgender youth who are young and who often do not know how to navigate in such a system.

Since moving to a rural area in the Cowichan Valley, specifically teaching in Duncan, BC, the author has seen that there is even less support for transgender youth in this area and school district. It has been observed by the author that teachers in school district 79 are not very well informed about the best practices for supporting transgender youth. Often, teachers have approached the author sharing they do not knowing how to talk to a student who identifies as transgender in regards to what gender pronoun they prefer, nor are teachers’ familiar with supporting transgender youth in regards to change room and bathroom needs. However, it is important to highlight that most teachers are open and willing to shift their language and to support policy implementation to support and accommodate youth in the school that identify as transgender.

More specifically, during school hours, transgender youth have feelings of isolation as well as anxiety around washrooms, change rooms, gender pronouns, and teachers’ reactions to gender identity.
There is growing awareness in Canada that gender does not always match sex assigned at birth. Gender also may not fit neatly into the two boxes of women/men or girls/boys. Some people identify with terms such as transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, gender fluid, or even agender (Veale, 2015, p. 4).

Transgender students face extremely hostile and discriminatory school environments; across the country transgender and transsexual students have poorer educational outcomes, report less attachment to their school environment and identify far greater experiences of harassment, homelessness, discrimination, and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse than both their heterosexual and sexual minority peers (Grossman, D’Augelli, & Frank, 2011; Marksamer, 2011).

The schools and school districts should be working with transgender youth, parents of transgender youth, transgender community leaders, and professionals to develop effective policies and programs that can create supportive school environments. “Strategies could include: adopting explicit gender-inclusive school policies, training for teachers, school counsellors and administrators on gender identity development and gender-affirming approaches, awareness campaigns and education for students” (Veale, 2015, p. 69). School boards have a legal duty under the BC Human Rights Code to make sure that their schools are free from bullying, harassment, and discrimination and must have effective policies and procedures for accommodating trans students and keeping them safe (Trans Rights BC, 2016). Reportedly, transgender youth hear transphobic comments at school and do not feel safe at school,

90% of trans youth hear transphobic comments daily or weekly from other students and almost a quarter (23%) of trans students reported hearing teachers use transphobic language daily or weekly. Almost three-quarters (74%) of trans
students reported being verbally harassed about their gender expression. 44% of trans students reported being likely to miss school because of feeling unsafe and 15% reported having skipped more than 10 days because of feeling unsafe at school. (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 23)

For transgender youth living in rural settings there are still more challenges. “Without the resources and support for LGBTQ youths in urban areas, there are still more challenges. A University of Kansas professor has authored a study into the unique challenges gender and sexual minority youths living in rural areas face and how social workers, communities and educators can help them” (Krings, 2016). Paceley, Associate Professor of Social Welfare at Kansas University, conducted a study where she interviewed 34 gender minority youths living in nonmetropolitan areas in a Midwestern state, “The findings revealed four areas of need for the youths: reduction in isolation, social acceptance and visibility, emotional support and safety, and gender and sexual minority identity development” (Paceley, 2016, p.81).

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

The following research question has shaped the present study: How do rural, school district 79 youth who identify as transgender or non-gender conforming, find belonging in a school community, and what do these same youths suggest as best practices for the teachers and staff in school district 79 in order to increase a connection to school?

The hypothesis the author proposes is that youth who identify as transgender or non-gender conforming that are enrolled in high school, in the rural Cowichan Valley school district 79, will report the way they experience a sense of belonging in their school community through connection to peers, teachers, school community and activities. Further, the author of the present
study hypothesizes that the youth will recommend the best practices that the teachers and staff in school district 79 can implement to create a safe learning environment including, but not limited to: gender-neutral and gender-affirming bathrooms, using the student’s preferred name and pronoun and creating an environment where students find a community and sense of belonging with teachers and peers.

**Definition of Terms**

The following definitions will be pertinent to the present study: ‘Transgender’ is a term denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex. ‘Cisgender’ is a term of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth. ‘Vulnerable’ is a term where the subject is susceptible to physical or emotional attack or harm. ‘Advocated’ connects to how one speaks or writes in favour of; support or urge by argument; recommend publicly. ‘Vernacular’ is the everyday speech of the people (as distinguished from literary language).

**Brief Overview of Study**

The study investigated the reported needs from transgender and gender variant students in school district 79 and turned these into best practices that have been shared with teaching staff and administration throughout SD #79 as well as to amend the already existing SOGI (Sexual Orientation Gender Identity) Policy. Participants completed a survey, either anonymously online, or in a one-on-one interview with the author, which addressed their specific needs as transgender students in SD #79. The participants also had the option of creating a piece of art using whatever creative medium they chose. The art project allowed the participants to visually express their
feelings of belonging at school and was guided by the statement: “In any artistic way, represent what makes you feel connected to your school community.” Students submitted their pieces of art to the author and they shared their interpretations about the piece in relation to finding belonging in their school community.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a growing awareness in British Columbia that Transgender students continue to find school to be an unsafe place. With the new BC Secondary Curriculum in the process of being unveiled, SOGI (Sexual Orientation Gender Identity) policy is a part of this new curriculum and is one that districts and schools are grappling with. The topic of transgender youth in schools has become one often discussed, debated, and researched. This literature review looks at the importance of transgender youth finding belonging in the school community, the role that Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs), teachers, administration, peers, and curriculum implementation have on the sense of belonging that transgender students report in schools.

“Freedom from discrimination based on sex is a right. It is clear that a man and a woman must be treated the same before the law. As society progresses, the traditional concept of “sex’ based on birth is become less relevant. Instead, “gender” irrespective of birth sex determines rights. It is not uncommon for individuals to self-identify as transgendered, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, gender variant, genderqueer, androgynous, and so on”. (Bowers & Lopez, 2012)

Transgender Youth as an At-Risk Group

Saewyc E., Poon C., Kovaleva K., Tourand J., & Smith A. (2016), state that research in Canada and elsewhere shows that LGBTQ youth face higher levels of discrimination and bullying, lower levels of family, school, and community support. Trans youth are the most vulnerable adolescent population, due to both violence and harassment by peers and they experience higher rates of discrimination, violence, substance abuse, and suicide ideation than their gender-conforming peers (Kosciw & Cullen, 2001). “They also face higher risks of health
challenges including suicidal thoughts and attempts, and problem substance use. However, when LGBTQ youth experience safe and supportive schools, and supportive families, they are much less likely to report these challenges” (Saewyc et al., 2016, p 5).

The case study researched and discussed in Clark, Lucaseen, Bullen, Denny, Fleming, Robinson and Rossen (2013) was focused on the health and well-being of transgender high school students as reported by the New Zealand Adolescent Health Survey. Data was collected in Youth '12, a national, cross-sectional, population-based youth health and well-being survey of New Zealand secondary school students. Students were asked to complete a survey answering questions about awareness of being transgender, disclosure of being transgender, protective factors, violence, and personal safety and health and well-being.

Clark et al.’s (2013) study participants consisted of 8000 randomly selected secondary students from 91 randomly selected high schools, accounting for 3% of the total 2012 secondary school roll in NZ. The racial composition of the subjects was primarily New Zealand European (49.2%) with the other subjects being Maori (19.6%), Pacific (13.1%), Asian (12%) and Other (6%) (Clark et al., p 96).

The focus of Clark et al’s (2013) study was to report the prevalence of students, according to found gender groups (non-transgender, transgender, or not sure about their gender, and those who did not understand the transgender question), and to describe their health and well-being. The authors’ findings indicated that the students who reported being transgender (1.2%), or not sure about their gender (2.5%), had compromised health and well-being relative to their non-transgendered peers. The conclusions that came from the main results of the study stated that transgender students and those reporting ‘not being sure’, are a numerically small but
important group that face considerable health and well-being disparities (Clark et al., 2013 p 93).
Clark et al (2013) stressed that it is important to address the challenging environment these students face and to increase access to responsive services for transgender youth. The findings of Clark et al (2013) highlighted the important point that “Transgender adolescents may be considerably different from LGB youth, but to date, researchers have often combined the groups” (Clark et al., p 94).

The results of the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey by Veale, Saewyc, Frohard-Dourlent, Dobson, Clark and the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey Research Group (2015) aimed to highlight the physical and mental health issues that Canada’s transgender youth face and to highlight the best practices to support transgender youth in Canada. This is the first and the largest of its kind of study focusing on transgender youth in Canada and is a representative sample of 923 individuals participating between the ages of 14-25 who answered a range of questions in English or French about their home and school life, physical and mental health, access to health care, and gender identity (Veale et al.)

Veale et al’s study (2015) was designed to examine how to best improve the well-being of trans youth through the best practices highlighted by the trans youth that participated in the survey. Of the many key findings, the study found that the majority of youth (83%) reported living in their felt gender at least part of the time, but, two-thirds of participants reported discrimination because of their gender identity and about half reported discrimination due to their physical appearance (Veale et al, 2015, p.13). Family relationships were highlighted as very important, and while 70% of trans youth reported feeling that their family did not understand them, 1 in 3 did not have an adult in their family they could talk to about problems (Veale et al,
2015, p.16). It was reported that when the youth had high levels of parent support and family connectedness, they reported much better health.

Veale et al (2013) found that mental health issues were a major concern with nearly two-thirds of participants reporting self-harm in the past year; a similar number reported serious thoughts of suicide and more than 1 in 3 had attempted suicide. Trans youth who had supportive adults were four times more likely to report good or excellent mental health (Veale et al, p.38). Overall, trans youth generally reported low connectedness to school, however, those who did feel connected to school were twice as likely to report having good mental health (Veale et al, p.39).

In a study led by Sausa, trans youth related numerous instances of daily harassment, ninety-six percent of the participants in this study reported being verbally harassed in school and 83% reported physical harassment (Sausa 2003). Most of the trans youth (75%) did not feel safe in school and three out of four participants reported dropping out (Sausa, 2003, p19.)

“The needs of trans youth are different from their gay, lesbian, and bisexual peers–and more complex than trans adults. They go beyond the issues of sexual orientation and homophobia in a heterosexist society... Although trans youth are often linked to the lesbian, gay, bisexual community, many identify as heterosexual. It is their non-conforming gender expression and identity that exposes them to acts of transphobia, as opposed to their assumed sexual attraction to people of the same gender. (Sausa, 2003, p.16).

The cumulative literature suggests that some transgender youth face significantly more mental health difficulties, such as depression, anxiety and self-harming behaviors, and engage in more sexual risk-taking than their gender conforming peers (McGuire et al., 2008). Negative
experiences with families and parental rejection provide another possible explanation for difficulties faced by transgender youth (Grossman et al. 2005).

Transgender youth experience pervasive victimization, mental and physical health disparities, and difficulties accessing helpful resources more so than their non-transgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) peers (D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006). Not surprisingly, they feel less safe in school and have higher levels of unexcused absences and dropout rates, less of a sense of school belongingness, more academic difficulties, and fewer plans to attend college than their non-LGBT peer’s due to harassment (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; McGuire et al., 2010; Sausa, 2005).

**Best Supports for Transgender Students in Schools**

Currently, there is a dearth of research examining whether the supports that are effective for LGBQ youth are effective in improving the school climate for transgender youth (Greytak et al. 2013). Four LGBT-related resources – GSAs, supportive educators, inclusive curricula, and comprehensive anti-bullying/anti-harassment policies – were related to more positive school climates and better educational outcomes for LGBT youth in the aggregate (Kosciw et al., 2010; Kosciw et al., 2008).

In 2010, McGuire and colleagues did examine the benefits of school-based resources for transgender youth using survey data. Students talked about the importance of having an adult ally at school to help them access accommodations, such as private bathrooms and locker rooms. Along with ensuring that LGBT-related resources truly address the “T” in a meaningful manner, it is important for educators, advocates, and policymakers to recognize how the needs of transgender youth may be both similar to, and different from, the needs of their cisgender peers.
Gender segregation within school facilities (i.e., bathrooms, locker rooms, and physical education classes), gender-specific dress codes, and classroom procedures that sort students into groups by gender may all pose particular challenges for transgender students.

**School Community**

Taylor et al (2015) conducted a climate survey of Canadian schools to collect information from students all over Canada on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in public schools (2015). Taylor et al (2015) examined the results of this national survey to highlight what life is like at school for students with sexual or gender minority status. As well, they identified and shared students’ experiences of homophobic and transphobic incidents at school and to make recommendations to school districts on how to support these youths.

Data was drawn from surveying over 3700 students. Taylor et al. (2015) focused their study on the amount of times that homosexual and trans youth had been verbally harassed about their gender expression, sexual orientation, and experienced sexual harassment, feeling unsafe at school highlighting PE change rooms and washrooms. The study found that homosexual and transgender youth of colour and aboriginal youth are more likely to be physically harassed or assaulted because of their ethnicity and their gender expression.

According to Greytak et al, nine in ten transgender youth have been victimized at school, including more than one quarter that had been physically assaulted because of how they express their genders (Greytak et al., 2009). This unsafe school climate can impede transgender youth’s access to education, resulting in these youths skipping school or dropping out altogether (Greytak et al., 2009).
GSAs Creating Belonging in a School Community

Overwhelmingly, Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) have been reported to positively connect transgender youth with the greater school community, as well as creating a sense of belonging in the school and overall improving school climates. According to Poteat et al, the presence of a GSA was consistently the resource that provide the strongest benefits to both transgender and cisgender LGB youth. GSA presence may have some effect on how students, particularly LGBTQ students, perceive their level of safety and belonging at school (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig & Russell, 2012). GSA-sponsored initiatives may foster safer school climates in general and benefit all students, not only those who are GSA members. Saewyc states that “the weight of evidence suggests that GSAs are positively linked to better mental health and lower rates of substance use, and in some studies, lower levels of anti-gay discrimination and bullying” (Saewyc, 2016, p.6). Having a GSA could result in: Up to 7 fewer suicide attempts by LGB and straight students, saving the healthcare system an estimated $71,540 per school per year; 41 fewer students reporting recent binge drinking; 16 fewer students with problem substance use (Saewyc, 2016). GSAs have been associated with more positive school climates (e.g., fewer homophobic remarks, less bullying) and perceived school safety (Russell, Kosciw, & Saewyc, 2010).

The importance of GSAs for queer youth has been found in other studies, but most studies do not specifically focus on GSA as an important tool for transgender youth. The value of a GSA may be variable in its benefit for transgender youth based on how transgender friendly the specific GSA teacher sponsor and participants are (McGuire et al, 2010). It was found that when the leadership development among GSA advisors and peer leaders could focus on ways to specifically support transgender students as a means to improve participation and school
experiences for transgender students, then the experience of a GSA was successful for transgender students (McGuire et al, 2010).

In addition, GSAs may serve as a source of support for transgender youth, providing them with a safe haven that results in increased feelings of safety, comfort, and connectedness in school and, in turn, to fewer incidents of missing school because of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable (Greytak et al, 2013). “It has been found that having a GSA may be even more beneficial for transgender youth than for cisgender LGB youth” (Greytak et al, 2013, p.57).

Another possible explanation for the differential effects of GSAs for transgender youth as compared to cisgender LGB youth is that GSAs may serve as a more critical source of information about transgender issues getting out to the wider school community including students, staff and administration (Greytak et al, 2013). It is possible that GSAs address this disparity by sharing information about transgender people with the school community, resulting in more supportive environments for transgender youth.

It has been established that GSAs can break the emotional and physical isolation for LGBT teens, while also building a culture of greater acceptance. They can also be a platform to provide training for their staff on how to create and support the school’s LGBTQ community which can lead to more information about transgender students being shared with staff and the greater school community.

**Sexual Orientation Gender Identity Policies**

SOGI (Sexual Orientation Gender Identity) Policies are now being created and implemented throughout BC. There is substantial research that suggests that district-level policy making and enforcing directly benefits transgender students in their daily experience in school
(Saewyc et al., 2016). District level efforts to train existing advocates on issues of gender identity and to publicize the availability of those advocates to young people could go a long way to improve the status of individual students as they move through schools. Findings such as this make clear the importance of regional coalitions that seek to improve climates for transgender youth. It may be that schools will be more likely to take action when they are supported by an external coalition such as a SOGI task force (McGuire et al., 2008). When schools implement LGBT issues in the curricula, transgender students feel safer and report a safer environment for their gender nonconforming peers (McGuire et al, 2008).

**SOGI Policies in Canada.**

In June of 2017, the Trans Equality Canada Coalition, a group of activists advocating in support of Bill C-16, celebrated the passing of a law that is an important step toward protecting transgender individuals from violence and discrimination (Amnesty, 2017). Bill C-16 amends the Canadian Human Rights Act and Criminal Code of Canada to explicitly prohibit discrimination and violence on the grounds of gender expression. The passage of bill C-16 will positively impact the lives of trans people, “from the simple act of being counted in the census to feeling safe in public bathrooms; it also paves the way for future policy and legislative changes, for example, making it easier to obtain identification documents that align with their gender identity” (Amnesty, 2017).

In 2013, the Toronto District School Board moved to strengthen its supports for trans students. The board, whose *Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Independent/Non-Conforming Students and Staff* were the first of their kind in Ontario, continued to improve its protection of trans students from harm at school by:
“Developing resources for assisting with the designation of all-gender washrooms, including informational video(s) and resource documents to answer frequently asked questions. Posting signage for all-gender washrooms, in a format approved by the Board. Providing training to all Family of Schools, including coverage of gender identity, gender expression, accommodation, the TDSB Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students and Staff and understanding diverse gender inclusion strategies” (TDSB 2013)

**SOGI Policies In BC.**

The Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF) created a document in 2016 that the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) adopted as part of the LGBTQ Policies and Regulations. This *Policy on Anti-Homophobia and Anti-Heterosexism*, provides an inclusive list of definitions to ground the policy. “The CTF advocates for educational systems that are safe, welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities” (CTF, 2016, p.2). The document goes on to state that the CTF believes that “the role of educators is critical in creating positive societal change to address the realities of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Two-Spirited (BGLTT) issues for students, parents and teachers” (CTF, 2016, p.2) and that “an assumption of heterosexuality as being the only sexual orientation throughout the school system denies BGLTT students and same-gender parented family’s affirmation and accommodation” (CTF, 2016, p.2). The policy then states that anti-homophobia and anti-heterosexism education must be implemented into all schools and for the education to become effective “educators must accept their responsibility to educate themselves and to reflect upon their own attitudes and behaviours in modeling respect, understanding and affirmation of diversity” (CTF, 2016, p.2).
Now that BGLTT, now known as SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) is being written in to the new BC curriculum, educators now more than ever have a responsibility for the elimination of homophobia and heterosexism in the working and learning environment (CTF, 2016). Saewyc and colleagues in B.C. also looked at the presence of anti-homophobia policies in schools. Information about policies was gathered from schools and school district websites as well as from school administrators (Saewyc et al., 2014). LGBTQ-inclusive anti-bullying/harassment policies are now being implemented in B.C. schools in order to improve outcomes for LGBTQ youth. Saewyc et al’s studies provide evidence that LGBTQ-inclusive policies contribute to better health among both sexual minority and heterosexual students.

“Based on a typical BC school, supportive policies could contribute to as many as 4 fewer suicide attempts, 37 fewer students binge drinking on 6 or more days in the past month; 21 fewer students with problem substance use” (Saewyc et al, 2014, p 14).

In the Fall of 2016, the BC government directed all school districts to include sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) in their anti-bullying policies and codes of conduct. The Ministry of Education, along with the teachers’ union, the Vancouver-based ARC foundation and others, collaborated on SOGI 123, an initiative that shares resources on how to support students and create more inclusive schools. Under the revised curriculum, teachers may explore the various components of the human rights code, including sexual orientation and gender identity. There are lessons on family diversity that include mention of same-sex families and LGBTQ rights.

The implementation of SOGI 123 into the BC curriculum is in year 2 of implementation and has participation from 51 of 60 districts (SOGI, 2018). On the website, there are 10 videos, 17 lesson plans, and 4 learning modules complete with PowerPoint presentations and facilitator’s
guides specifically for BC educators. Teachers choosing to address SOGI in the curriculum is NOT about students developing a particular set of beliefs around sexual orientation and gender identity, but is about building understanding of the diverse society that we live in and learning to treat each other with dignity and respect regardless of our differences (SOGI, 2018).

BC Education Minister Rob Fleming states “It is crucial that we help to ensure all students feel welcome in BC’s schools, regardless of who they identify as” (Alphonso, 2018, p.1). Glen Handsman, president of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, states that “regardless of what others think, we do have the legal and professional responsibility to be doing this work, and we are proud to do so and we’re going to continue to do so” (Alphonso, 2018, p.1). As well, this curriculum change must also shift to pre-service teachers as well as the institutions that education and certify these teachers. The CTF states that “teacher preparation programs must include: - knowledge, awareness and affirmation of those who identify as BGLTT; - strategies, lesson plans and curriculum that assist teachers in addressing BGLTT issues in classrooms and schools” (CTF, 2016, p.2). This is now being implemented in BC schools.

**SOGI Policies in SD 79.**

In 2014, SD 79 created policy 6510, *Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression.* The SD 79 Board of Education “recognizes its responsibility to provide a safe, inclusive and welcoming environment for all students and their families, employees and volunteers, including those who identify as or are perceived to be LGBTQ” (CVSD, 2014, p.1). As well, “The Board will not tolerate any behaviour that is discriminatory, harassing or intimidating towards students and their families, employees or volunteers, including those who
identify as or are perceived to be LGBTQ. The Board is committed to providing support and assistance to those who may be affected by such behaviour.” (CVSD, 2014, p.1). Further to this, SD 79 has joined the SOGI South Island network of educators who are committed to bringing SOGI curriculum and professional development into the schools and specific classrooms through SOGI resources, SOGI library materials as well as professional development by SOGI representatives to staff during staff meetings and/or Professional Learning Communities.

**Curriculum Implementation**

There is a small, but growing body of research that is examining the lives and experiences of transgender youth; however, most of the research is based on the physical and mental struggles that these youth face. There is much less known about the experiences that transgender and gender variant youth are having at school. There have been several qualitative studies that have shown that transgender students face “pervasive harassment and assault because of their gender identities, gender expressions, and their actual or perceived sexual orientations, and they are often subjected to intense scrutiny and judgement by their teachers at peers (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Gutierrez, 2004; Sausa, 2005; Wyss, 2004). Furthermore, school policies, practices, and spaces that enforce gender segregation, such as school bathrooms, locker rooms, security procedures, and dress codes, can also pose challenges for transgender youth (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Sausa, 2005), because they do not identify as either male or female or because other members of the school community do not accept them as the gender with which they identify.
BC Curriculum Implementation.

As of 2017, the BC Ministry of Education has revamped their “Safe and Caring School Communities Policy”. The policy states that it “guides boards of education and schools in their efforts to create safe and inclusive learning environments and develop prevention and intervention strategies for addressing worrisome behaviours including threats or risks of violence”. Members of the school communities share a commitment to maintaining safe and caring schools by “working together to better understand issues such as bullying, intimidation, harassment, discrimination, racism, sexism and homophobia, and other worrisome behaviours and to learn new skills to respond effectively to them” (BC Ministry of Education, 2017).

Updated in 2017, the BC Ministry of Education outlines in their “Diversity in BC Schools” Policy that “Addressing diversity, taking into account the different beliefs, customs, practices, languages, behaviours, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and physical differences of individuals and cultural groups” (BC Ministry of Education, 2017).

School-Specific Policies.

Trans youth report feeling afraid of harassment and violence from peers and school staff, especially when using bathrooms and locker rooms (Sausa 2005). The suggestion of creating gender-neutral bathrooms and developing and implementing a school policy that explicitly states that any harassment or violence toward a youth who does not conform to gender stereotypes or who is gender variant will not be tolerated (Sausa 2005). Trans youth also shared concerns about joining sports teams and reported anxiety around dress codes. It was recommended that educators should allow trans youth to join sports teams according to their self-identified gender and that education professionals should engage with the youth, ask them what name and
pronouns they prefer (Sausa 2005). In order to support educators, they need to receive training so that they are knowledgeable about the concerns of trans youth. Districts should form a committee or task force to evaluate how they can address and meet the needs of trans high school students. Schools that implement anti-bullying/anti-harassment policies that include explicit protections from victimization based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression experience less harassment result in less bullying towards trans youth (Kosciw et al., 2010). It is critical that these resources provide the greatest benefit possible to transgender youth by explicitly addressing transgender issues. For example, school curricula should provide positive representations of transgender people, history, and events, along with its inclusion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual content (Greytak, 2013)

**Washrooms.**

“Public toilets in transit stations, malls, shopping centres, gas stations, sports arenas, concert halls, workplaces, schools, colleges and universities, restaurants, and bars are all – as interviewees explain – venues in which gender is subject to contestation and debate” (Cavanagh, 2010, p. 52).

Washrooms are a real source of anxiety amongst transgender youth because the assignment of the washroom used based on sex does not conform to the self-identification of the youth based on gender. It is the use of the restroom that may provide the first notice to a school that it has a child who is transgender. The Toronto District School Board already has a policy that addresses transgender accommodation. It specifically states that students may use the restroom in accordance with their gender identity (TDSB, 2015).
Washrooms continue to be a source of anxiety for trans youth who, in order to be accommodated, must out themselves, and that, in turn, increases the very risk of being victimized. The notion of requiring a student to out themselves based upon their gender identity and their need for accommodation is outlined in the EGALE Canada report that published the alarmingly high statistics of trans student victimization occurring within schools (Taylor et al., 2011). “By placing the onus on the students to not only out themselves, but also claim their own transgender identity and the subsequent required accommodations, these policies continue to allow heteronormative and cisgender privilege to dominate within the schools” (Omercajic, 2015, p. 136).

Taylor, Peter, McMinn, Elliott, Beldorn, Ferry, Gross, Paquin and Schachter (2011) conducted a national survey of 3,607 Canadian high school students where they found that both heterosexual and LGBTQ students across the country stated “hallways, washrooms, and change rooms, in particular, are perceived as battle zones for LGBTQ students, places where bullies indulge in the perverse pleasure system of homophobia and transphobia by tormenting them” (p.9). Those who are seen as transgender or as gender non-conforming trouble the gender signs on the bathroom doors. These individuals challenge the gender normative matrix that was initially cemented by cisgenderists (Cavanagh, 2010).

**Teachers and Administration as Allies**

Often trans youth feel a lack of advocacy and support by school administrators, staff, and educators. Trans youth expressed a need for schools to create and enforce policies and protocols that protect trans students, and for all school staff to be trained on trans issues, including school psychologists, counselors, teachers, and administrators (Sausa, 2005). Trans youth felt more
empowered and were able to survive the system with the help of others who respected them and believed in their abilities (Sausa, 2005).

Overall, there is a lack of training and preparation to work with transgender youth in educational pre-service teaching programs. While supportive adults can make a difference for queer and trans and gender-nonconforming students educators are still often resistant (Sausa, 2005). One study showed that 40% of secondary and 44.4% of elementary programs failed to include these issues in their curriculum (Frohard-Dourlent, 2016). While teachers and students are increasingly accepting, schools remain places in which LGBT-identified students experience considerable homophobia and bullying. Teachers play a vital role in making schools safer for LGBT students. Faculties of Education have an ethical and legal obligation to foster the understandings and competencies needed to address LGBT issues in school (EGALE, 2011).

As allies, counselors and educators can improve transgender students’ safety within the school environment, which can lead to increased academic achievement and higher quality of life among these youth (McGuire et al., 2010). Adult allies in K–12 settings can mentor transgender students, sponsor LGBT student organizations, advocate for transgender inclusion, and connect transgender students to resources in the community (McGuire et al., 2010).

As can be seen, the issue of transgender student rights is emergent and complex. However, with the new implementation of SOGI curriculum and policies embedded into the new BC curriculum as well as the passing of Bill C-16, transgender rights for students is a timely and often discussed topic. Slowly, SOGI training and curriculum is making its way into classrooms in BC. Recommendations that schools, staff and the community should receive education about transgender issues continues as does advocacy for transgender students in schools, districts and
across the province of BC. All students have the right to an environment that is free from discrimination, harassment, and bullying. A strong example of inclusiveness must be modeled by all school employees to create an environment that is welcoming and inclusive to all students.
Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods

Introduction

This chapter briefly outlines the three main ways that the author of the present study collected data from participants for this study. This exploratory study examined the needs, as well as the expression of belonging at public school, of youth who identify as transgender or non-gender conforming, in School District (SD) #79 in the Cowichan Valley. The author collected data through an anonymous online survey, a one-on-one interview, and an original piece of art created by the students. The students choose to participate in one, two, or all three of these methods of collecting data.

Description of the Research Design

Recruitment.

This survey was promoted through the participating schools’ Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) and through conversations with school administration and counsellors. The author visited the participating schools’ GSAs and explained to the students that attended the meeting the research and explained that the data collected from both the online survey, as well as the one-on-one survey, would be analyzed and presented in the researcher’s Master’s Thesis. As well, the data gathered will be used to modify the already existing Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression (SOGI) Policy for School District #79.

Survey.

Participants were invited to complete an anonymous online survey, which asked about their degree of feeling of belonging in their school community as well as suggesting best practices for the teachers and staff of school district #79 so that the students will, in the future,
feel a greater connection to their school. The anonymous survey was gathered using a link that was emailed to participants. The data was gathered using Survey Monkey data collection.

**Interview.**

A sample of students who identify as transgender or non-gender conforming were invited by the author to participate in an interview and were asked questions relating to connectivity to school, explicit gender-inclusive school policies, connection to teachers, administration and school counsellors, gender pronouns, bathroom and change room challenges, athletics and identity and physical spaces, while at school. The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions that allowed for the participants to describe their experiences of belonging in school. The responses to the interview questions were audio recorded and then transcribed.

**Art Project.**

In this qualitative study, the researcher gathered pieces of art students submitted using whatever creative medium they chose, from youth that identify as transgender or non-gender conforming high school students in SD#79 in the Cowichan Valley. The art project allowed the participants to visually express their feelings of belonging at school and was guided by the statement: “In any artistic way, represent what makes you feel connected to your school community.” With consent, the researcher photographed or recorded the art pieces submitted as visual data. The pieces of art were submitted along with a short summary, written by the student, describing how the visual representation articulates their feelings of connectivity to their present school.

**Description of the Sample**

The student participants were students who identified as transgender or gender variant in Grades 10, 11 and 12, recruited from four separate schools within SD #79 in the Cowichan
Valley: Cowichan Secondary, Cowichan Valley Open Learning Cooperative School (CVOLC), Chemanius Secondary and Frances Kelsey. All of these schools run Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs), which was where the students who participated in the interview-style surveys were recruited from, complete with the support of the staff and administration at the schools. Participants were recruited with the help of the high school GSA teacher sponsors, counsellors, and administration. The researcher was able to present the recruitment scripts (see appendix A) at the GSA meetings at all four of the schools’ GSA meetings.

The author is a teacher at Cowichan Secondary School. The students were kept anonymous by not identifying them by school or age. The sampling criteria for the study required that the participants: 1) identify as transgender or gender variant 2) be enrolled in Grade 10-12; 3) be at least 15 years of age; 4) complete the consent form; and 6) be willing to complete the survey.

Description of Instruments Used

Online survey.

The online survey consisted of 10 questions that asked about grade, felt-gender, gender-identity, pronoun usage, the usage of space at school, connection to school, connection to teachers, administration, staff and other students, gender-neutral spaces, bathrooms as well as open-ended questions so that the student can elaborate on their experiences at school and their sense of belonging (see Appendix B). The author of the study designed these questions after talking to transgender students in her class and listened to the concerns that they informally shared with her. After thinking of these concerns that the students shared, the author came up with this list of 10 questions that asked the students a variety of ways that they connect to school as a transgender or gender variant student.
Interview.

The structure of the interview used the same questions that were used in the anonymous online interview. The author kept the questions the same deliberately so that the results of the online interview at the one-on-one interview could be compared, and the results could be presented together (see Appendix B).

Art Project.

It was thought that at the high school level participants might enjoy having the option to express themselves creatively and would be more likely to volunteer their time and ideas. Even though visual data is an emergent research method, the author was aware of allowing free expression and to give the student participants the option of expressing their connection to school via a visual medium. To allow for as much freedom of expression as possible, the only guiding element of the artistic expression component of the study was the prompt: “In any artistic way, represent what makes you feel connected to your school community?” (Appendix C)

Explanation of the Procedures Followed

The author used the first month of the 2017-2018 school year to contact GSA sponsors, counsellors and administration in the various schools to inform them about the project through email, phone calls or in-person visits. During this month, a recruitment poster (Appendix D) was used to recruit participants from the high schools who self-identified as transgender or gender-variant. The poster explicitly stated that parental consent would be needed and that students would remain anonymous in the study, but they may be identifiable by their art. It also stated that students could participate in the art portion, online survey, and interview portion of the study, or just one or two of the options. The poster was displayed in counselling offices at all of the schools and also was given to all of the GSA sponsor teachers.
In the first week of October, the researcher established contact with the participants and arranged times to distribute the parental permission forms (see Appendix E) and participants’ informed consent forms (see Appendix F). Once the permission forms had been collected, the researcher contacted the participants of the artistic expression component of the study and gave them the prompts. The participants had until the first week of February 2018 to submit their artwork to be photographed by the researcher and then their artwork was returned to them. Once collected, the photograph as well as the writing that the student submitted about the piece of art was stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s classroom.

At the time of the study, the Cowichan Valley SD#79 had an existing Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression (SOGI) Policy. Participants were made aware that the results of the online survey, interviews, as well as the piece of art would be published and that their recommendations would be suggested to amend the existing district policy. The potential participants were informed of the criteria of the questions and any questions were fielded. Online surveys could be accessed by the first week of October. Surveys were created using “SurveyMonkey” software. Students were given the link via email from the author of the present study. Participants were informed that they were not required to complete the survey and could choose to discontinue participation by simply not submitting their survey.

Interviews were scheduled for the second and third weeks in November 2017. The researcher established email or phone contact with the participants and arranged for a mutually convenient time and place to meet the participants. The interviews were scheduled for half an hour time slots. The questions that were asked guided some of the answers, but the researcher allowed the interviews to run more like conversations. The interviews were voice recorded. During the interviews, participants were invited to elaborate on their answers with personal
anecdotes and were informed that while their stories would be shared, their identity would remain anonymous.

**Discussion of Validity**

The author of the present study acknowledges the probability that many of the participants know each other and, potentially, have been taught by the author. The author expressed concern that the students may be more likely to participate in the study due to the pre-existing relationship with the author and her position in the school and district.

The data gathered was examined using respondent-driven sampling, a method used to obtain research and knowledge, from extended associations, through previous acquaintances, and through mutual association. The author is a Teacher in SD 79 and therefore was familiar or was acquainted with the administration who approved this research, as well as who assisted in picking the students for the survey. Furthermore, the sampling was even more specific, as only youth who identify as transgender, who attended a school in SD 79, and were teenagers were able to take the survey. Each survey produced both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the samples and graphic representations of the data were constructed.

**Description and Justification of the Statistical Techniques Used**

Descriptive statistical comparisons were made for the entire data set. Respondent-driven sampling assumes that those best able to access members of “hidden populations”, in this case, transgender youth, are their own peers, or the adults closest to them. Results were gathered by three separate ways that are outlined below.

**Survey.**

Six participants only chose to participate in the anonymous online survey. Six different students chose to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. The questions that
both groups were asked were identical. The author kept the questions the same deliberately so that the results of the online interview at the one-on-one interview can be compared and the results can be presented together.

Questions 1, 2 and 3 were visually depicted using a bar graph to represent the findings from the survey questions. Question #1 utilized a graph depicting the vertical axis of the number of participants and the horizontal axis being the grade of the participants. Question #2 utilized a graph depicting the vertical axis of the number of participants and the horizontal axis being the participants assigned sex at birth. Question #3 utilized a graph depicting the vertical axis of the number checks corresponding to the student’s present gender identity with the horizontal axis listing: Boy or Man, Girl or Woman, FTM, MTF, Trans Boy or Trans Man, Trans Girl or Trans Woman, Feel like a girl sometimes, Feel like a boy sometimes, Two-spirit, Intersex, Crossdresser, Genderqueer, Bi-Gender and Other.

The data collected from questions #4 and #5 were visually shown using a pie chart, the percentage of participants who are living in their felt gender at school as well as what percentage of participants who are using a different name or pronoun different from the one they were given at birth.

The data collected from questions #6 and #7 were an expanded description of issues related to belonging to the student’s school community. The researcher will collate the individual responses from the students, summarize, and present the findings in a short answer format highlighting the places where transgender youth feel belonging both in a structural place and in social settings at school.

To demonstrate the findings from questions #8, #9 and #10 the author of the present study presented the findings in a vignette paragraph. According to Barter (1999):
Vignettes may be used for three main purposes in social research: to allow actions in context to be explored; to clarify people’s judgements; and to provide a less personal and therefore less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics. In qualitative research, vignettes enable participants to define the situation in their own terms (p. 1).

The researcher took the data that the students presented and created a qualitative method where the researcher took the best practices as described by the participants and actually described a school where students that identify as transgender and gender-variant have a sense of belonging in their school community. This vignette is the truth as told by the participants of this study. This has been presented to the teachers, administration, staff and school district as a recommendation for the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression (SOGI) Policy for School District #79.

**Art project.**

The student participants were excited to creatively share their visual and artistic expression about belonging. It was observed that there were some common images among the pieces of art that were submitted that centered around creating a place of belonging in the school community.
Chapter 4: Project

Introduction to Results

This exploratory study examined the needs, as well as the expression of belonging at public school, as reported by youth who identify as transgender or non-gender conforming in School District #79 in the Cowichan Valley. The author of the present study collected data through an anonymous online survey, a one-on-one interview, and an original piece of art created by the student. The students could choose to participate in one, two, or all three of these methods of collecting data.

Results from Survey

Some participants only chose to participate in the anonymous online survey. Others chose to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. The questions that both groups were asked were identical. The questions were kept deliberately the same so that the results of the online interview and the one-on-one interview could be compared and the results could be presented together.
Bar Graphs

Fig 1. Name and grade of participants.
Fig 2.

Number of participants and their assigned sex at birth.
Fig 3. Present gender identity of youth who were interviewed

The participants could identify in more than one category which is reflected in the fact that the percentages result in over 100% for each participant. Youth who responded to this question shared that they felt a variety of ways about their gender identity. They were able to respond to more than one question. None of the youth reported that they identified as girl or woman, MTF, two spirit, intersex or crossdresser.

Circle Graphs

Fig 4: Percentage of participants that are living in their felt gender
Fig #5. Percentage of Participants who are using a name or pronoun different from the one they were given at birth

50% of the participants reported, yes, they were using a different name or pronoun different from the one they were given at birth. 50% reported “other” and they indicated that:

“Sometimes I used they/them”

“Sometimes I use she/her”

“I only have another name to some people”

“I do but some parents/friends refuse to use it”

“I am not entirely out to teachers, so I don’t use it at school”
Short Answer Responses

Question #6 asked the participants, “As a youth that identifies as transgender or gender-variant, what is our biggest concern at school during the school day?” There were a variety of responses, however, 90% stated that both change rooms/locker rooms and washrooms were the biggest sources of anxiety for transgender and gender variant youth in SD #79. 50% of participants stated that having a place to “be” during lunch and breaks was of concern. 50% also stated that students and teachers not using their chosen pronoun and name was a major concern at school. 50% also stated that they regularly received disparaging comments about their hair, clothing, and appearance at school. 50% reported hearing transphobic comments at school from both teachers and students.

Question #7 asked the participants, “Do you feel, as a youth who identifies as transgender that you (check all that apply): You have trouble getting along with teachers? Your teachers care about you? You have trouble getting along with other students? Feel that you are part of your school? Do you feel safe at your school?

25% shared that they have trouble getting along with teachers at school. 25% felt that their teachers cared about them. 50% shared that they have trouble getting along with other students. 50% felt that they were part of their school. And, only 25% felt safe at their schools.

Vignette Paragraphs

The participants shared what their ideal gender-neutral place would look like in their school community. Some participants shared that their school had such places and some shared what they would ideally like.
The youth stated that they would like their ideal gender-neutral place to be a “chill spot for people of all backgrounds to hang out” as well as to be a place “where everyone feels safe”. They shared that it should be “inclusive. There should be places to sit, places to work on art projects, a place where you can write nice things about people and share that. Maybe a little compliment jar”. Many shared that they wanted to have both pride and transgender flags on the walls as well as lots of art on the walls. More than one participant shared that they wanted “a place that they can feel ownership over” and many simply wanted “a hangout room. Just a place for LGBTQ+ kids in the school to be and to feel safe”.

The participants shared how many gender neutral washrooms that their school had and, if their school does not have any gender-neutral bathrooms, what would they look like?

Four participants reported that their schools had one or two designated gender-neutral washrooms that had appropriate signage on the doors. One participant stated that although there are gender neutral washrooms, that “they are located in the basement of the school and they are not easily accessible. There are so many boy/girl washrooms. I just feel like they could change at least one”. Another participant shared that there is one but it is a repurposed differently-abled washroom that is almost always occupied with people “either pooping or smoking drugs or other stuff”. For those students whose school did not have one they shared that, ideally, it would be a place that is a single bathroom, that having their own space is important as was having a gender-neutral bathroom sign that designated the washroom as a place where “all students can use, regardless of their gender identity or expression”.
Anecdotal Data

By answering these questions, transgender and gender variant students in SD #79 have been able to share the best practices as described by the participants and actually described a school where students that identify as transgender and gender-variant have a sense of place, ownership, and belonging in their school community. At the end of both the one-on-one, as well as online survey questions, the participants were asked if there was anything else that they wanted to share, anything that they wanted the teaching staff and administration at SD #79 to know about being a transgender student. Below is anecdotal data taken from the interviews with transgender and gender variant youth in SD #79:

“After the email was sent out about my wish to be called by my chosen name and male pronoun, a teacher who I had a relationship with previously, saw me in the hallway and stuck out her hand and said ‘Hi ****, nice to meet you’ as if I was a whole new person…I thought it was so cute. It made me feel so good.”

*FTM Youth talking about the positive effects of proper name/pronoun usage*

“For PE, I go into the Girls change room and I go into the big stall with a door and I change there. I need a quiet space to change. Yeah – but I don’t like it. When I go in, I try to do it when someone is not there or else I have to go in with another girl to prove that I’m not perving. Its super frustrating. I get kind of scared for me because if I think that if they watch me do this then they are going to figure this out and then I am going to be uncloseted.”
FTM Youth talking about gendered change rooms

“My biggest issue is when Teacher don’t use my chosen pronoun/name – most do their best – I had to correct one a couple of times. He was continually using the wrong pronouns. I was like “dude I’m a guy” and after that he changed. If teachers make a mistake they should just apologize and move on. Teachers can show non-verbally that they are an ally to a LGBTQ+ community by putting up signs/pride flags “that’s so gay with an x” visual things to show that all are accepted in their classroom”

FTM Student talking about Teachers

“Have a space in the school for Trans and Queer Youth. A visible space so they can feel included in the community and the school, yes, through gender neutral bathroom signs, a room, gender free zone. It would be great to have a Pride Day/a Pride Dance to include it in more of a normal setting. Saying, hey, this is normal too.”

FTM Student about inclusivity at school

Participants were asked “What is the main way that Teachers and Staff in School District #79 can support students that identify as transgender or non-gender conforming?” The results of this question were varied. The participants recommended that:

“At the beginning of a new class/beginning of the semester, hand out a survey asking about gender, pronoun and name preferences. Hold an inclusive pride day or something to help reassure struggling youth that being part of the LGBTQ+ community can be safe fun and problem free. Continue having a GSA - it’s important. If a student asks if they be can be referred to by a specific name or pronouns that in the attendance it should be written to keep a healthy
reminder and effort present to make the student comfortable. Also, change their name on their report card if they ask”

“Learn how to respect names/pronouns and be supportive of trans/gender non-conforming kids. Also add a 'gender not specified' option on the school records. I know you can change it back and forth from male/female but there's no in-between”

“Just make sure that they are ok, and call out bullying”

“By being accepting and not using transphobic language”

“Use the correct name/pronouns and correct students when they use LGBTQ+ slander”

“Listen and educate themselves and use that to educate their classes. Especially in the younger grades. There needs to be more gender based presentations, that would be useful. I think that school counsellors should be able to have a few resources on hand if a gender variant student needs help of some sort as well”

**Art project**

The student participants were excited to creatively share their visual and artistic expression about belonging. The art project allowed the participants to visually express their feelings of belonging at school and was guided by the statement: “In any artistic way, represent what makes you feel connected to your school community”.

Two student participants shared their creative expression with me. The first was a drawing of a tattoo entitled “Jazzhands Tattoo”.
This drawing was made by a student who is training to become a tattoo artist. They were a student in my Art class. They made me this and wanted to contribute to my thesis and shared: “I made this for you because you made me feel safe at school. As well, me and your cat have similar names and I wanted to make you something that you could carry with you on your body. Drawing makes me feel safe. Your art class made me feel safe and I was able to find a community of other weird artists at school in your class”.
Another student that I interviewed created a painting to be included in the study.
They stated, “Trees and nature tie everyone together and the air that we breathe and the soil we walk on and whatnot. Sometimes you really need a breath of fresh air. Finding common friends and a safe space at school was my breath of fresh air”.

Finding common friends and a safe space to be were the most common themes that were depicted through these two pieces of art. Both the youth the I interviewed shared that having a place where they belong and where they can be themselves and have friends, is the most positive way to create a sense of belonging in a school community.

Overall, the transgender and gender variant youth in SD 79 Cowichan Valley were happy to share their feelings, concerns, and opinions about what it is like to be a transgender or gender variant youth in one of the four high schools in SD 79. Overwhelmingly, washrooms and change rooms were the number one cause of anxiety and stress in these youth’s daily lives at school. They also expressed hearing transphobic language often from both teachers and students. Many shared that they really wanted to have a place to “be” during breaks and lunches and expressed a lack of gender-neutral/safe places for them to be in the school community. When the participants shared what made them feel safe in their school community, they cited gender neutral washrooms, the presence of a strong GSA, teachers using their chosen name and pronoun in class as well as teachers, counsellors and administration calling out transphobic and other hurtful language during school hours.
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions

Summary

Youth that identify as transgender or gender variant are reported to have a harder time finding belonging in their school community and face higher levels of discrimination and a lack of community support, than their gender-conforming peers (Saewyc et al., 2016). Creating a sense of belonging where transgender youth can feel accepted and welcomed is an important factor in transgender students staying in school, as well as creating and maintaining student wellbeing.

With the legislation of Bill C-16 in June of 2017, transgender people are now protected under the Canadian Human Rights Act and Criminal Code of Canada to explicitly prohibit discrimination and violence on the grounds of gender expression (Amnesty, 2017). Since the Fall of 2016, the BC government directed all school districts to include sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) in their anti-bullying policies and codes of conduct. With the creation of SOGI into the BC public school curriculum, teachers are encouraged to incorporate SOGI content into their lesson plans. As well, each district in BC is now mandated to have a SOGI policy that supports all students, employees, and volunteers, including those that identify or are perceived to be part of the LGBTQ community. Trans youth experience more of a connection to school with comprehensive policies that include GSAs, anti-homophobic and transphobic bullying policies, and training for teachers (Taylor et al., 2016).

The purpose of this study was to explore whether transgender youth in rural public schools in SD #79 Cowichan Valley are an under-supported and a vulnerable population who are not adequately advocated for by the teachers in their schools. The secondary purpose was to
educate the teachers of SD #79 in an effort to shift the school culture and to increase support for transgender youth in the school communities.

The research question that guided the study was: How do students in rural schools in district 79 youth who identify as transgender or non-gender conforming find belonging in a school community, and what do these same youths suggest as best practices for the teachers and staff in school district 79 in order to increase a connection to school?

Qualitative data was gathered through one-on-one interviews, anonymous online interviews, as well as the gathering of art from the participants with youth that identify as transgender and gender variant in the Cowichan Valley. Two of the participants submitted pieces of visual art to be included in the study along with explanations as to why the pieces of art reflected their sense of belonging as transgender students in SD 79.

After gathering the anonymous online data as well as transcribing the one-on-one interviews, the data revealed that while trans youth did face many barriers to feeling integrated into the school community, they were able to articulate what aspects of the school community could be altered to make school a more welcoming and inclusive place for transgender youth in SD 79. Ninety percent of the youth stated that both change rooms/locker rooms and washrooms were the biggest sources of anxiety for them during the school day. Many went on to suggest that the creation of gender-neutral bathrooms with accompanying signage was the main way that schools can visually show that trans youth are welcomed in the school community. The other main concern that youth shared was teachers not using their chosen pronoun and chosen name during school. The youth stated that they would like their ideal gender-neutral place to be a place that all people from all backgrounds can come, where they can feel safe, a place that is inclusive,
has pride and transgender flags as a visual representation of acceptance, as well as a place that they can feel ownership over. Overall, the youth reported that they wanted to be part of the school community as well as have a safe space to simply “be”.

**Implications for SOGI Policies and how they affect Trans Youth**

As stated above, BC school boards have been mandated to have a SOGI policy that supports all students, employees, or volunteers including those that identify or are perceived to be part of the LGBTQ community. The current SOGI policy in SD 79 is lacking in a variety of areas. The policy states that “The Board will implement strategies and guidelines to ensure that students and their families, employees and volunteers who identify as or are perceived to be LGBTQ are welcomed and included in all aspects of their education, their child’s education, their employment or their service, as the case may be, and are treated with respect and dignity” (SD 79, p1). To date, these strategies and guidelines have not been shared with the school community. However, there has been a creation of a SOGI board in SD 79 with representatives from each school. The author of this study is the school’s representative and will be bringing forward these recommendations from youth that identify as transgender and gender variant, to amend this existing SOGI policy.

Currently, SD 79 is supportive of creating safe places for transgender and gender variant youth. Funding has been provided for the creation of a SOGI board which includes SOGI representatives from each school in SD 79. However, not all schools have a GSA, only three schools have designated gender neutral bathrooms, and only one has signage that is explicit. No schools have gender neutral change rooms. More inclusive and specific policies and procedures need to happen at the school level in all the schools in SD 79. This could include designating
gender-neutral washrooms, gender-neutral change rooms, training on SOGI issues for all staff, admin and support staff, more visual supports for transgender and gender variant youth including better-advertised GSA meetings, pride flags on doors in schools, and clearer procedures put in place for dealing with transphobic bullying.

**Teachers as Allies**

SD 79’s SOGI policy is in place, however, not many staff are aware of it, nor, is it conclusive enough to support students who are transgender or gender variant. There needs to be more explicit and direct ways written into the actual policy for how to support transgender and gender variant youth in the school district. With the creation of the SOGI committee, SD 79 is demonstrating their commitment to implementing SOGI content in schools through peer education as well as curriculum implementation. Through the interviews, many of the participants shared that teachers would not use their chosen name nor pronoun or they simply would forget the name that they preferred as well as their preferred pronoun. It is very important that all staff receive the training that they need to become more informed so that they can become better allies who accept each student’s identity, use the correct language as well as become advocates for transgender youth in SD 79. Participants recommended that teachers can show non-verbally that they are an ally to the LGBTQ+ community by putting up signs/pride flags in their classrooms. Research done by Saewyc (2016) supports the importance of rainbow flags and stickers as visual reminders that LGBTQ+ youth belong in a space.

**Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs)**

In order to create a safe and inclusive school environment where transgender and gender variant youth feel safe the presence of GSAs is immensely helpful. The author runs the GSA
(Rainbow Club) at her school in SD 79. The participants talked about the GSA being a safe space at school where they can make friends, eat lunch, participate in projects (Rainbow Day, school pride, gender-neutral bathroom signs, art projects). This backed up all of the research about how GSAs are important for transgender youth to feel connected to their school community.

**Suggestions from Participants**

The results from the question “What is the main way that Teachers and Staff in School District #79 can support students that identify as transgender or non-gender conforming” were varied. Participants overwhelming reported that using the students' chosen name and pronoun was a way that teachers can demonstrate caring and create a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. GSAs were cited as the main and most useful way to create community at school for transgender and gender-variant students. Calling out transphobic language was another way that teachers could support trans youth which is in line with what the literature around this topic is saying. Students also shared that having a safe space where they feel welcomed and where they can be themselves is the most positive way to create a sense of belonging in a school community.

Many of the participants were encouraged to hear of the creation and implementation of SOGI committee and hoped that SOGI content would be placed (with an emphasis of transgender content) into curriculum, for resources to be created and made available, as well as professional development opportunities for staff to be offered in an effort to create safe schools for all students.
Limitations

One of the main challenges of the research was the fact that the school district required that I receive parental permission in order for youth to participate in the project. A number of times youth that identified as transgender or gender variant shared that they were very interested in participating but that there was “no way” that their parents would sign the parental permission form and/or they were not out to parents yet so they were not comfortable asking for permission. This led to the sample being smaller than anticipated and the voices of all interested youth that identified as transgender or gender variant not heard due to this barrier.

Another limitation was the lack of participants who submitted art for the project. The two students that did submit work were happy to do so, however, they were both students at the author’s school so it was easy to hand in the art. There were a number of participants from other schools that indicated that they wanted to submit art piece, one even indicated that they were writing a rap about being transgendered, however, since the author had limited ways to be in touch with the youth participants, the submissions of art were limited.

The final limitation was the demographic of my participants. All of the youth are Caucasian students who identify as female to male (FTM) students from grades 9-12 in high schools in SD 79. As a result, the results of this research project are from a fairly homogeneous group of people coming from similar backgrounds and experiences. This led to a small, biased sample of participants.

Suggestions for Further research

The main goal of this research was to give transgender and gender variant students in SD 79 a voice and for them to share what is lacking in our district in regards to supporting trans
youth and what is missing from the SOGI policy. The data that came out of this research was thoughtfully shared. The author was constantly struck by the youth’s willingness to share extremely personal and private things about their lives in relation to being a transgender youth. This research builds off of similar research projects being done on Vancouver Island, however, many more voices could be shared. It would be interesting to see how a similar project would be executed in a variety of different locations with different demographics, sizes of towns/cities, districts and even countries. How does a diverse group of transgender youth recommend that their school district support them and how do they find belonging in their own community? It would be interesting to see the differences as well as similarities when the size or demographics of the sample differs greatly in regards to the recommendations from the youth.

Lastly, the author is passionate about bringing forward these recommendations to the school district, SOGI committee, as well as the school community. It would be interesting to see how the recommendations have affected the youth that are in younger grades in following years in regards to developing and implementing policies that support and address the full accommodation of trans students in K-12 schools.

**Conclusion**

The data that was summarized out of this research is going to be presented to the staff, administration, district as well as informing the culture of school communities in the Cowichan Valley. As well, the recommendations out of the interviews will be presented to the superintendent as suggestions to modify the already existing SOGI policy for SD 79. As well, the author hopes that it encourages support of the SOGI policies and supports in schools throughout the school district.
The main ideas that came out of this research were many. Specifically, transgender and gender variant youth in SD 79 shared:

- Using a student’s chosen pronoun and name is the most important way that a teacher can show support to transgender and gender variant students
- Having gender neutral washrooms and change rooms greatly decreases the high levels of anxiety that trans youth experience on a daily basis at school
- GSAs and supportive school involvement can greatly influence a transgender student’s sense of belonging, create community as well as have a positive impact on the broader school community
- Teachers can visually show support to the LGBTQ+ community by putting up pride flags and posters in their classroom as a way of demonstrating support
- Adults as allies as well as supportive friendships are important factors in transgender and gender variant student’s connection to their school community as well as creating a safe place for trans and gender variant youth to be

It was a privilege to be able to do this research. The students that I met and interviewed were incredibly open, honest, funny, raw and shared their truth with me. After I conducted the interviews and I transcribed them, I was again struck by the honesty that these youths shared with me and I feel lucky to be able to present their findings and to continue to be a fierce advocate and ally for transgender youth in the Cowichan Valley.
References


Hélène Frohard-Dourlent (2016) ‘I don’t care what’s under your clothes’: the discursive positioning of educators working with trans and gender-nonconforming students, Sex Education, 16:1, 63-76, DOI: 10.1080/14681811.2015.1022819


Vulnerable Youth Centre, School of Nursing, UBC. Retrieved from http://www.saravyc.ubc.ca/2015/05/05-being-safe-being-me-results-of-the-canadian-trans-youth-health-survey

Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Invitation to Participate

Transgender and Gender Variant Students in SD 79

Dear Student,

My name is Alison Donnelly and I am a teacher at Cowichan Secondary School in the Cowichan Valley School District #79. I am currently enrolled in a Master’s Degree program in Educational Leadership at Vancouver Island University. A core component of the program involves conducting a research study that is designed to improve education for students.

The intent of my study is to find out and ask how rural, school district #79 youth who identify as transgender or non-gender conforming, find belonging in a school community, and what do these same youths suggest as best practices for the teachers and staff in school district 79 in order for to increase a connection to school. It is my intent that the data collected from both the online survey, the one-on-one survey and that art works submitted will be used to create an inclusive and thorough Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression (SOGI) Policy for School District #79.

The attached parent/guardian consent and student assent forms are being offered to you as an invitation to participate in this research study. Participation is entirely voluntary and anonymous, and you can withdraw from the study at any time. By submitting a completed parent/guardian consent form, completed student assent form, and completed questionnaire to the Cowichan Secondary School office by October 31st, 2017, you agree to participate in this research, allow me to collect information from you, and allow me to include this information in the results of the study.
Appendix B: Anonymous Online Survey + One-on-one Interview

1. What Grade are you in?

2. What was your assigned sex at birth?

3. Which of the following describes your present gender identity? (Please check all that apply)
   - Boy or Man
   - Girl or Woman
   - FTM
   - MTF
   - Trans Boy or Trans Man
   - Trans Girl or Trans Woman
   - Feel like a girl sometimes
   - Feel like a boy sometimes
   - Two-spirit
   - Intersex
   - Crossdresser
   - Genderqueer
   - Bi-gender
   - Other, please specify:

4. Are you currently living in your felt gender at school?

5. In your day-to-day life, do you use a different name or pronoun from the one you were given at birth, one that better reflects your gender identity?
   - Yes/No

6. Describe your sense of belonging in the following school-based structural places or situations:
   - Washrooms
   - Change rooms/Locker Rooms
   - Place to be where you can feel comfortable at school during lunch/breaks
   - Teachers not using your chosen pronoun/Name
   - Comments about your hair/clothing/appearance
7. Describe your sense of belonging in the following school-based social settings or situations:
   
   In your relationship with your teachers
   
   In your relationship with the administration (P and VP)
   
   In your relationship with other staff (counselors, secretary, custodian)
   
   In your relationship with other students

8. If your school were to create a “gender neutral place” – what would that look like?

9. Does your school have gender-neutral bathrooms? If so – how many? If not – what would that look like?

10. What is the main way that Teachers and Staff in School District #79 can support students that identify as transgender or non-gender conforming?
Appendix C: Art Prompt

Art Prompt

Student participating in the art project were able to visually express their feelings of belonging at school and was guided by the statement:

“In any artistic way, represent what makes you feel connected to your school community.”
Appendix D: Recruitment Poster

Supporting Transgender Students in SD#79: Finding Belonging in a School Community

Are YOU between the ages of 15-18 and in grades 10, 11 or 12?

Do you attend a public high school in school district #79?

Do you identify as Transgender or Gender Variant?

There are THREE ways that you can participate:

1: Take the anonymous survey that will ask you about your connection to school as well as ask for your recommendations on how staff, teachers and admin can better support trans youth in SD79. Email Ms. Donnelly for the link adonnelly@sd79.bc.ca.

2: Participate in a one-on-one interview with Ms. Donnelly, the researcher of the study. The questions will be similar to the anonymous survey and will ask you about your connection to school as well as ask for your recommendations on how staff, teachers and admin can better support trans youth in SD79. Parental consent will be needed. Contact Donnelly @ adonnelly@sd79.bc.ca for permission forms.

3: Create a piece of ART that visually expresses YOUR feelings of belonging at school and was guided by the statement:

In any artistic way, represent what makes you feel connected to your school community.

If you are interested in 1, 2 or all 3 of these ways of sharing your unique voice and telling SD#79 how we can best support you and your connection to the school community take a tab below with the link to the survey and/or contact Ms. Donnelly, the researcher.

Ms. Donnelly, Art Teacher, Cowichan Secondary School, SD #79

adonell@sd79.bc.ca
Appendix E: Parent/Guardian Consent Form

**Parent/Guardian Consent Form**

**Supporting Transgender Students in SD#79: Finding Belonging in a School Community**

The purpose of this research study is twofold: to determine how youth who identify as transgender or non-gender conforming find belonging in a school community and what do these same youths suggest as best practices for the teachers and staff in SD#79 Cowichan Valley to implement to increase a connection to school?

The researcher will collect data through three methods: an anonymous online survey, a one-on-one interview and a piece of art created by the student. The students can choose to participate in one, two, or all three of these methods of collecting data.

Participants are invited to complete an anonymous online survey, which asks about their degree of feeling belonging in their school community as well asks for recommendations by the students for best practices that the teachers and staff of school district #79 can implement so that the students can feel a greater connection to their school.

Participants are invited by the researcher to participate in a one-on-one interview. Students will be asked questions relating to connectivity to school, explicit gender-inclusive school policies, connection to teachers, admin and school counsellors, gender pronouns, bathroom and change room challenges, athletics and identity and physical spaces, while at school. The responses to the interview questions will be audio recorded and then transcribed.

Lastly, students are invited to create a piece of art using whatever creative medium they chose to visually express their feelings of belonging at school and guided by the statement: “In any artistic way, represent what makes you feel connected to your school community.”

With consent, the researcher will photograph the art pieces as well as collect a short summary,
written by the student, describing how the visual representation articulates their feelings of connectivity to their present school.

You are being asked to provide consent for your child’s participation in the survey, interview and/or art submission project to be used as research data. All surveys, interview transcripts and/or photographs of the artwork will be stored in a locked box to safeguard participant anonymity and confidentiality. Data collected will be destroyed, by shredding, upon completion of the project in September 2018. Results from this study will be reported in a class presentation, written thesis, and may be shared at a School District #79 District Showcase, and may be published online through Vancouver Island University’s library. The researcher also will be using the data gathered to create an inclusive and thorough Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression (SOGI) Policy for School District #79. No information will be disclosed that may identify individual participants.

Participation is entirely voluntary and anonymous, and students can withdraw from the study at any time. If you have any comments or questions about this research project, please contact me at the email address below.

Alison Donnelly

Master of Educational Leadership: Student

Vancouver Island University

adonnelly@sd79.bc.ca.

VIU Research Ethics Board

Vancouver Island University

Nanaimo, B.C., Canada V9R 5S5

250-753-3245 ext. 2416
To provide consent for child to participate in this research study please complete this form and ask your child to submit it, a completed student assent form, and completed questionnaire to the school office by October 31st, 2017. If you do not want your child to participate, do not complete or return this form.

__________________________________________
Name of student (please print)

I have read the above consent form. I understand the nature of this research study and the nature of my child’s participation in this research study. I understand that my child’s participation in this research study is completely voluntary. I understand that my child may choose to withdraw from this research study at any time, even though I have granted consent.

I consent to allow my child to participate in this research study.

I consent to allow my child’s survey question answers to be included in this research study.

I consent to allow my child’s interview question answers to be included in this research study.

I consent to allow my child’s artwork to be included in this research study.

__________________________________________
__________________________
Signature of legal guardian Date
Appendix F: Participants Informed Consent Forms

Student Assent Form

Supporting Transgender Students in SD#79: Finding Belonging in a School Community

The purpose of this research study is twofold: to determine how youth who identify as transgender or non-gender conforming find belonging in a school community and what do these same youths suggest as best practices for the teachers and staff in SD#79 Cowichan Valley to implement to increase a connection to school?

The researcher will collect data through three methods: an anonymous online survey, a one-on-one interview and a piece of art created by the student. The students can choose to participate in one, two, or all three of these methods of collecting data.

You are invited to complete an anonymous online survey, which asks about your degree of feeling belonging to your school community as well asks for recommendations from you as best practices that the teachers and staff of school district #79 can implement so that transgender and gender-variant students can feel a greater connection to their school.

You are invited by the researcher to participate in a one-on-one interview. You will be asked questions relating to connectivity to school, explicit gender-inclusive school policies, connection to teachers, admin and school counsellors, gender pronouns, bathroom and change room challenges, athletics and identity and physical spaces, while at school. The responses to the interview questions will be audio recorded and then transcribed.

Lastly, you are invited to create a piece of art using whatever creative medium you chose to visually express your feelings of belonging at school and guided by the statement: “In any artistic way, represent what makes you feel connected to your school community.” With consent, the researcher will photograph the art pieces as well as collect a short summary, written
by you, describing how the visual representation articulates their feelings of connectivity to their present school.

All surveys, interview transcripts and/or photographs of the artwork will be stored in a locked box to safeguard participant anonymity and confidentiality. Data collected will be destroyed, by shredding, upon completion of the project in September 2018. Results from this study will be reported in a class presentation, written thesis, and may be shared at a School District #79 District Showcase, and may be published online through Vancouver Island University’s library. The researcher also will be using the data gathered to create an inclusive and thorough Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression (SOGI) Policy for School District #79. No information will be disclosed that may identify individual participants.

Participation is entirely voluntary and anonymous, and you can withdraw from the study at any time. If you have any comments or questions about this research project, please contact me at the email address below.

Alison Donnelly

Master of Educational Leadership: Student

Vancouver Island University

adonnelly@sd79.bc.ca

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Nanaimo, B.C., Canada V9R 5S5

250-753-3245 ext. 2416
To agree to participate in this research study please complete this form and submit it, a completed parent/guardian consent form, and completed questionnaire to the school office by October 31st, 2017. If you do not want to participate, do not complete or return this form.

________________________________________
Name of student (please print)

I have read the above assent form. I understand what will happen during this research study and I understand what my role will be in this research study. I understand that my participation in this research study is completely voluntary. I understand that I can choose to withdraw from this research study at any time.

I agree to participate in this research study. Yes  No

I consent to have my survey question answers to be included in this research study. Yes  No

I consent to allow my interview question answers to be included in this research study. Yes  No

I consent to allow my artwork to be included in this research study. Yes  No

________________________________________
Signature of student

Date